

**Submission  
No 30**

**INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Name:** Dr Christine Smith

**Date Received:** 27 June 2023

---

June 27<sup>th</sup> 2023

Submission: Inquiry into Veterinary workforce shortage in NSW

Dear Committee,

I have worked as an equine veterinarian in NSW (both academia and private practice) since moving to Australia in 2003. I worked at two university teaching hospitals (UTH) overseas before moving to a UTH in NSW from 2003 to 2010. I subsequently moved to private practice and purchased the same medium size equine hospital in the Hawkesbury. I sold the business to a corporate business in late 2021. A driving factor in selling the business was personal burnout, the extreme challenges of recruiting and retaining veterinarians, and a complete lack of any succession plan. I am a current member of two external advisory groups for university veterinary schools. My qualifications make me believe that I have a broad insight into the current challenges this profession currently faces.

There have been increasing difficulty in finding and retaining adequately qualified specialists in many areas. This has led to many university veterinary teaching schools needing to close hospitals altogether and/or cease to provide after hours and emergency services. Not only does this increase the pressure on private practices and their staff, but it also increases the stress on clients who may need to drive considerable distances to find the nearest equine practice that offers emergency after hour services (in our case 350 km or more). The inability of university teaching hospitals to offer after emergency services also negatively impacts veterinary student training.

Even though there appears to be sufficient numbers of veterinarians being trained in Australia, retention rates remain inadequate. This likely is associated with high numbers of international (full fee paying) veterinary students returning to their home country, or the realisation that the career they dreamed of in veterinary medicine was not what they expected and their career path shifts. Reviewing admission criteria may be in order.

There is a high rate of suicide in the veterinary profession. When I ask myself why I can suggest numerous contributing factors. The job itself is stressful; we are dealing with sick and potentially dying animals. We are concurrently faced with emotionally distraught owners. Especially in these economic times, ability to provide optimal care and treatment for animals may not be possible, adding to the anxiety, stress and despair of having a "family member" ill. Often this emotional load is transferred to the veterinarian, who generally does not have any professional training in conflict management or psychology and is ill equipped by other industry standards to deal with the challenges that routinely come with their job.

Work environments are becoming increasingly stressful. The reason people take their own life are usually complex and should not be summarised in a few lines. Particular traits of veterinarians, including highly driven, highly stressed, often exhausted and over worked, and frequently underpaid are likely recurring themes. A number of employees in the same area that are struggling with mental health issues can drive workforce disputes and create an unhappy, unhealthy work environment. This is compounded with increasing financial pressure on businesses and individual employees. In addition, the expectation continues (in mixed and large animal practices in particular) that employees (veterinarians and nurses) work after hours plus routine hours; the impact this has on work life balance, family, and mental and physical health cannot be underestimated. Mental health awareness and intervention is often poorly handled in many veterinary practices as well.

I am long on concerns and short on solutions. In my personal opinion, things that need to change within the equine veterinary industry to improve sustainability include setting up central after-hours facilities that are shared between multiple practices, or staffed by people who work emergency shifts (versus 24 hours a day when on call). For most equine clients to be able to afford emergency after hours treatment, in particular, surgery or intensive medicine care, insurances companies must offer a reasonably costed major medical policy similar to the policies in place in the UK.

Within the veterinary profession in general, additional training and support for veterinarians to include some basic business management concepts, conflict management, and grief support is essential. Within the workplace a support structure (may need to be external with qualified experienced people) needs to potentially independently funded and widely available (as is offered by the AVA). I am currently employed by a large corporate entity that spruiks its positive culture, working together, respect and care for colleagues and leading with compassion and care. I have been on stress leave for 5 weeks and no one has reached out to ask me if I need assistance. I have never taken a day of stress leave in 30 years and yet I cannot see a way forward currently. There are many things in the veterinary industry that need to change if sustainability is the goal. Improving options for veterinary recruitment outside of Australia would be a welcome, needed and appreciated step in the right direction.

Sincerely,

Christine Smith DVM Dip ACVS, Registered Specialist Equine Surgery

Agnes Banks Equine Clinic